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No. 366

THE BE-HOOVES US

A COMEDY OF CONSERVATION

BY

DORIS F. HALMAN

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IT BE-HOOVES US

CHARACTERS

JACK SPRAT.
MRS. JACK SPRAT.
AUNT SPRAT.
THE POLICEMAN.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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IT BE-HOOVES US

SCENE: *The dining-room of a very new flat, with a table set for two, and much bright silver in evidence. Outside door, back; kitchen door, left; bedroom door, right. At right, front, a buffet, bearing the silver; at left, front, a large cushioned chair.*

When the curtain rises, the room is empty. Then MRS. JACK SPRAT, a pretty, very young little thing clad in a charming negligée, enters from the kitchen, carrying a dish of pale gray muffins, which she sets proudly on the table. She tastes one, and suddenly the pride is gone. She looks queer.

MRS. SPRAT. (*Helplessly*) Oh, dear! (*She rushes back into the kitchen and emerges with a very new cook-book. Sitting down, she runs through its pages with one hand, holding the muffin in the other*) Muffins—bran—muffins—(*Finding the place, she reads eagerly. Then she looks up, all dismay, exclaiming:*) Molasses! (*She glances suspiciously at the pallid muffin*) The molasses—(*She is sure, and hopeless*) Oh, dear!

(*JACK SPRAT, very young and spruce, enters from the right. He beams at her through bow-rimmed spectacles.*)

JACK. Good-morning, Mrs. Jack Sprat!

(MRS. SPRAT *thrusts muffin and book behind the cushions of the chair, and rises.*)

MRS. JACK. Oh, darling! (*She rushes into his embrace*)

JACK. That's right—humor a near-sighted, rejected-from-the-draft husband, who can't see across the room how lovely, how adorable——

MRS. JACK. Oh, dear——!

JACK. Our first morning at home!

MRS. SPRAT. (*Peering across him at the muffins*)
Ye—es——!

JACK. Aren't you *glad* the honeymoon's over?

MRS. SPRAT. Of course—if you are.

JACK. Well, those hotels—they half starve you in war time.

MRS. SPRAT. (*In alarm*) Oh, Jack!

JACK. (*Misunderstanding*) Do you mean to say you got enough to eat?

MRS. SPRAT. Well, I suppose they have to conserve, too—if they hoarded, you know—that is, they might be arrested——

JACK. Can I get 'em arrested for the food they conserved on us?

MRS. SPRAT. You mustn't joke about such a serious——

JACK. Joke? Half portions; quarter portions; fractions of food——!

MRS. SPRAT. But——

JACK. Home cooking's the thing for me.

MRS. SPRAT. We—we have to conserve at home.

JACK. I shan't mind that, with my own little wife to cook for me.

MRS. SPRAT. I—I——

JACK. Do you remember what you said one day, so divinely confident? "Any woman can cook,"

you said, "it is born in her." Well, it's not born in hotels.

MRS. SPRAT. (*Faintly*) I didn't know you thought so much about eating, Jack.

JACK. My dear, take it from me: it's bad food breaks up home after home, these days. Yes, that's what does it!

MRS. JACK. Oh! Oh! Are you *sure*?

JACK. Cer—tain! And that reminds me—(*He starts for the table*)

MRS. SPRAT. (*Hastily*) But we're not going to have our little home broken up by that. Our home—just look at it. Everything so new.

JACK. Enough silver to set up a jewelry shop.

MRS. SPRAT. I'd die if anyone sent us any more silver.

JACK. Well, who's going to? Isn't the stuff all in—yet?

MRS. SPRAT. Oh, you forget. We haven't heard from Aunt Sprat—she's so eccentric. Nor from my rich uncle that lives in Cuba. Maybe he won't send a present, because he never saw me. I'd have been named for him, if I'd been a boy.

JACK. I guess we can do without their old presents! But there's one little thing we can't do without, my dear! (*He starts for the table*)

MRS. SPRAT. (*With dread*) What's—that?

JACK. (*Cheerfully*) Breakfast!

MRS. SPRAT. Oh, yes.

JACK. (*Seeing the muffins*) All on the table, too! And growing cold while we've been talking.

MRS. SPRAT. No. That's only the muffins. The rest is—cooking.

JACK. Let's start on a muffin, then.

MRS. SPRAT. (*Fluttering round him*) Oh, I wish you wouldn't! I don't want it broken up!

JACK. Want what broken up?

MRS. SPRAT. The—muffin.

JACK. Nonsense! But I'll wait, if you want me to. How long will it be, dearest?

MRS. SPRAT. Oh, the coffee ought to be done by now; and I'll start the omelet right away. (*She bustles toward the kitchen*)

JACK. (*Puzzled*) Everything sounds so piece-meal.

MRS. SPRAT. (*Turning, indignant*) Jack Sprat! You try and see if you can cook more than one thing at once! (*She flounces out, with great dignity.*

JACK, *left alone, steals a muffin, and bites into it. He, too, looks queer.* MRS. JACK *returns with the coffee*)

JACK. (*As she serves him*) What sort of muffins are these, Elsie?

MRS. SPRAT. (*After a long pause*) War—muffins.

JACK. Oh.

ELSIE. (*Gaining courage*) I was afraid you wouldn't like them. But it behooves us to Hooverize. You know it does.

JACK. (*Gloomily*) Oh, yes, I believe in it.

ELSIE. (*Cooing with relief*) You poor dear!

JACK. Maybe they'd taste better, with some butter on them. Haven't you forgotten the butter, darling?

ELSIE. (*Unwilling to admit it*) Jack Sprat! You—you—you can't eat any fat!

JACK. Why not?

ELSIE. It's needed with ammunition.

JACK. It's needed with these. (*He tastes the coffee*) Elsie!

ELSIE. Oh, dear, what is the matter?

JACK. The—coffee—Is it——

ELSIE. Why, of course, it's coffee.

JACK. But——

ELSIE. (*With another inspiration*) It seems queer to you, because it hasn't any sugar in it.

Coffee without sugar always tastes just that way. Yes. Really.

JACK. Then I want sugar.

ELSIE. But Mr. Hoover——

JACK. Look here, Elsie, we're going ahead of the hotels on this!

ELSIE. But it's so wonderful! It's our share of the sacrifice. You see, you can't fight on account of your eyes, and I drop stitches dreadfully when I knit. It's just up to us to save food.

JACK. You're always right.

ELSIE. Cheer up, dear. It won't have to last forever. As soon as I learn——

JACK. Learn?

ELSIE. To knit better.

JACK. Oh.

(They relapse into gloomy silence. In the midst of this, the doorbell rings twice.)

ELSIE. Oh, it's the postman! Our first morning mail!

JACK. I'll get it. *(He goes out. ELSIE scurries for the hidden things in the cushioned chair, but is forced to replace them as JACK re-enters)* Letter—"Mrs. Jack Sprat." Doesn't that sound fine?

ELSIE. Let me have it. *(She opens, and they read together)*

JACK and ELSIE. *(Reading)* Dear Elsie, all I know about in this world is sugar, and so for a wedding present I am sending you—*Sugar!*

JACK. Hurrah!

ELSIE. Oh, dear!

JACK. Your uncle in Cuba is all right! We'll have good coffee now. I'm going to 'phone the express office, and see if it's arrived.

ELSIE. Don't—don't hurry.

JACK. Eh?

ELSIE. The omelet's cooking.

JACK. Oh, yes. I forgot. Is it a war omelet?

ELSIE. I don't know yet.

JACK. What?

ELSIE. I mean, it is, of course. Eggs are conservation.

(Another bell peals.)

JACK. What's that?

ELSIE. It must be the back door. Don't you remember, the janitor rang it to show us how it sounded. *(She goes out. Here she must take the muffins with her. JACK reads the uncle's letter. There is a thud in the kitchen)*

JACK. *(Looking up in dismay)* She dropped the omelet!

(ELSIE enters from the kitchen, very excited and mysterious.)

ELSIE. Jack!

JACK. *(Jumping up, alarmed)* Yes?

ELSIE. *(In hushed tones)* The most awful thing is in our kitchen!

JACK. Good Lord! A bomb? What is there, Elsie?

ELSIE. A barrel. A half-barrel.

JACK. A——

ELSIE. Of flour.

JACK. What? Honest? White bread! White bread!

ELSIE. Oh, dear!

JACK. But how did it get in our kitchen?

ELSIE. A man brought it.

JACK. But who told him to?

ELSIE. Oh, I don't know. And we're law-breakers!

JACK. We are not.

ELSIE. Yes. Hoarding. We can be arrested for that barrel.

JACK. What'll we do?

ELSIE. I bet some other person was hoarding it, and got suspected, and shipped it here, because we were a bride and groom——

JACK. That's no reason.

ELSIE. And maybe the police have tracked it all the way—oh, dear, oh, dear!

JACK. Well, if they've done that, they won't blame us; so cheer up, darling. And we'll get rid of it just as soon as we can.

ELSIE. (*Cheered*) How?

JACK. You can cook it into white bread!

ELSIE. (*Dejected again*) That's no consolation.

JACK. (*Trying to comfort her*) Oh, I know how you feel. White bread isn't very patriotic now. But neither is hoarding. So don't you see—?

(*The doorbell rings.*)

ELSIE. (*Starting up*) The police!

JACK. Oh, nonsense! (*He starts for the outer door*)

ELSIE. I'm frightened!

JACK. Trust in me! (*He goes out.* ELSIE listens fearfully. JACK comes back with AUNT SPRAT, who carries a bulging knitting-bag). It's only Aunt Sprat, Elsie.

AUNT SPRAT. (*An elderly super-feminist*) Only Aunt Sprat?

JACK. Well, you see, we were expecting the police——

ELSIE. Oh, dear—(*She has jumped to her feet in alarm; now she turns the movement into a caress of AUNT SPRAT*) dear Aunt Sprat!

AUNT SPRAT. Didn't think you'd be so cordial, when I hadn't sent you a present.

ELSIE. As if that mattered!

JACK. We have plenty of silver.

AUNT SPRAT. Silver! That's just it. Silver in these times is tomfoolery. I waited for you to get into your own home, so that I could send you a sensible present.

JACK and ELSIE. *Oh?*

AUNT SPRAT. Has it come?

JACK and ELSIE. What?

AUNT SPRAT. The most valuable present a human being could receive—a half-barrel of flour.

ELSIE. Oh, was it you?

JACK. It's in the kitchen. (*He lowers his tone mysteriously*)

ELSIE. (*Also hushed*) But don't tell anybody.

AUNT SPRAT. What's the matter with you?

ELSIE. Some—someone might want to borrow my lovely present!

JACK. Yes. You bet we thank you, Aunt Sprat! And we don't want to share it with anybody.—(*Then, politely*) Except you.

AUNT SPRAT. My store-room is piled to the ceiling with its substitutes. Of course, I trust Elsie not to use it on wheatless days.

JACK. Oh, she won't. She's a great conserver!

AUNT SPRAT. Good. Remember that every time you save, a poor soldier is spared suffering.

JACK. It isn't my fault I'm near-sighted.

AUNT SPRAT. What do you mean by that?

JACK. Nothing. I'm willing to suffer my share.

AUNT SPRAT. Well, the two of you seem to have the right idea. I'll be going back, now I've seen you. (*She takes a covered dish from her knitting-bag, and sets it on the table, lifting the napkin*) These are for your breakfast. Thought they'd help Elsie out. (*She displays a plate of dark brown muffins. ELSIE gasps with horror*)

JACK. What is it? I can't see.

AUNT SPRAT. War muffins.

JACK. (*Gasping with horror*) Oh!

AUNT SPRAT. Have one.

JACK. No. No, thank you, Aunt Sprat.

AUNT SPRAT. You're polite, I must say!

JACK. No, but—Why, you see, I've had breakfast.

AUNT SPRAT. Already?

ELSIE. Yes, yes.

JACK. (*Smiling at her inanely*) War muffins and all.

AUNT SPRAT. All the same, I think the least you could do, after I brought the dishful here, is taste one.

(*JACK starts toward her obediently.*)

ELSIE. (*Quickly*) Oh, I will! Let me!

(*JACK, all his chivalry aroused, puts her aside.*)

JACK. (*Quietly and nobly*) My dear, you have a husband. (*He takes a muffin and eats. ELSIE can only look on in fear. JACK'S expression is wonderful to behold*)

ELSIE. Oh, dear!

JACK. (*In huge delight*) I say, Aunt Sprat, how did you ever on earth make the darn things taste like this?

AUNT SPRAT. They're just common, ordinary bran muffins.

JACK. *Are they?*

AUNT SPRAT. What's the matter? Did you think war food had to taste like poison, just because it was invented to do some good in this world? Then all I can say is, you've got a happy surprise coming to the both of you. Try any war recipe, and find out. Go into any public place, and read the bulle-

tins the National Food Administration sends around. You'll find 'em hanging on big boards, in good, plain sight. Recipes and all. Try 'em. And when you've finished those muffins, come to me for more! (*She stops and sniffs the air*)

JACK. Elsie, do you hear?

AUNT SPRAT. Did you say you'd finished breakfast?

ELSIE. Oh, yes!

AUNT SPRAT. Smells like smoke.

ELSIE. From—from one of the other flats, I suppose. (*Her thoughts are on JACK, who has helped himself to a second muffin*)

AUNT SPRAT. I never believed in apartment-houses for just that reason. Life and flour-barrels aren't safe. Why don't you complain?

ELSIE. (*Watching JACK*) We've just moved in.—We don't want to make trouble.

AUNT SPRAT. Then someone ought to save you from being burned alive. (*She starts for the door*)

ELSIE. (*Going with her*) Come again, won't you?

AUNT SPRAT. Yes, thanks. If you aren't burned out. (*She goes. JACK helps himself to a third muffin*)

ELSIE. (*Closing the door*) Oh, dear!

JACK. Darling, these are great! Why weren't yours—?

(*ELSIE begins to cry, and falls in a heap in the big chair.*)

ELSIE. (*Between sobs*) She's worried about us being burned out—losing our home—and—it's—going to be broken up—anyway!

JACK. Broken up?

ELSIE. It wasn't born in me—but how should I know?

JACK. Elsie—you mean——

ELSIE. Oh, dear—Oh, dear—Oh, dear—!

JACK. (*Bending over her sternly*) Elsie, tell me this minute—!

ELSIE. I—I—I—Oh, you'll never forgive me!

JACK. (*Fiercely accusing*) You can't cook!

ELSIE. It was bad enough having to hoard flour, when I didn't want to—and hiding from the police—and now a divorce——

JACK. You—you——

(*The bell peals loudly. They stop quarreling and stare at each other in dead silence.*)

ELSIE. The Police!

JACK. Oh, nonsense! (*He starts for the outer door*)

ELSIE. They trailed Aunt Sprat! I'm frightened!

JACK. Trust in me! (*He goes out, to return immediately, looking sadly frightened, and followed by a tall policeman with a snooping air*)

ELSIE. (*In a little shriek*) Oh, dear!

JACK. Er—come in, Officer. Got the wrong flat, haven't you?

POLICEMAN. (*Snooping*) Don't know yet. (*He looks ominously at the kitchen door. ELSIE and JACK both start toward it*) That your kitchen?

ELSIE. Yes——

POLICEMAN. Gimme a look at it.

JACK. (*Getting between him and the door*) No!

POLICEMAN. Why not?

ELSIE. The—baby's asleep out there—!

POLICEMAN. Is it, now? (*He makes as if to go in, all the same*)

JACK. (*Desperately*) We couldn't help it. We had it wished on us!

POLICEMAN. A foundling, you mean?

ELSIE. Yes, yes—!

POLICEMAN. That's no reason you should choke the poor little thing to death, is it?

JACK. Choke? What are you talking about?

POLICEMAN. With a burning smell, strong enough to knock a *man* down!

ELSIE. (*Crying out*) The omelet! (*She flies into the kitchen. The POLICEMAN laughs into a red bandana*)

JACK. Great Scott!

POLICEMAN. Bride and groom, aren't you?

JACK. (*Trying to hide his relief*) Yes. Yes.

POLICEMAN. Well, new couples is excused a lot. But it's dangerous. An old dame stopped me in the street just now—come from visiting in another flat—and says I was to hunt out the fire, or the building would go to the ground in no time.

JACK. I see.

POLICEMAN. (*Leaving*) You be careful with that wife of yours!

JACK. Yes, I'm going to take her to a restaurant.

(*The POLICEMAN goes out. JACK mops his brow.*)

ELSIE. (*Peering from the kitchen*) I—I've put out the fire.

JACK. How's the foundling?

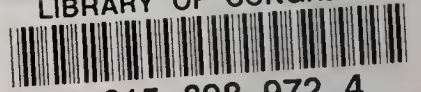
ELSIE. (*Flying to him*) Oh, Jack! You won't divorce me, will you?

(*JACK hugs her tight.*)

JACK. (*After a moment*) Do you suppose—that the National Food Administration gives cooking lessons? (*He begins to feed her with one of AUNT SPRAT'S war muffins*)

Curtain.

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